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# The Eternal Detective : Poe's Creative and Resolvent Duality in the Hardboiled Era

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper traces the continuity of Edgar Allan Poe's archetypal "creative and resolvent" detective from the nineteenth century's classical detective fiction into the twentieth century's hardboiled detective fiction. Specifically, this paper asserts that the duality first suggested by Poe in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) did not only define classical era detectives, but it also persisted into the radically different hardboiled era of American detective fiction. First, this paper examines the cultural contexts of each era and establishes the shared links between the resolvent—or analytical—traits and creative—or abstract and Romantic—traits of classical era detectives C. Auguste Dupin and Sherlock Holmes and hardboiled detectives Race Williams, the Continental Op, Sam Spade, and Philip Marlowe. This paper claims that the analytical skills of classical detectives are similarly present in hardboiled detectives, and that the creative eccentricity and melancholy of the classical detectives manifests as personal codes of Romantic honor in the hardboiled era. This complicates the traditional understanding of each era, as the two sub-genres share the same core character type yet tend to produce opposite messaging about the nature of liberal society. This paper contends that the creative and resolvent duality of both era's detectives made them perfectly suited to either address or expose the contradictions of the capitalist liberal democracies that produced them. Ultimately, this paper concludes with an examination of the socioeconomic motivations of each era's detectives and the resultant societal critique enabled by creative and resolvent duality.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

The Eternal Detective:

Poe's Creative and Resolvent Duality in the Hardboiled Era

by

Michael Cresci

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

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## Introduction

Ever since Edgar Allan Poe inaugurated modern detective fiction with the 1841 publication of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” the literary detective has been a constant presence in genre fiction. Poe’s sleuth, C. Auguste Dupin, would appear in three short stories, but his literary impact would expand far beyond those origins.

Early in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s 1887 novel, *A Study in Scarlet*, John Watson is so struck by the similarity between the deductions of his new companion Sherlock Holmes and those of Dupin that he immediately points it out. Holmes writes Dupin off as “a very inferior fellow” before going on to critique his analytical methods as a way of highlighting Holmes’ own superiority. He says, “That trick of his of breaking in on his friends’ thoughts with an apropos remark after a quarter of an hour’s silence is really very showy and superficial. He had some analytical genius, no doubt; but he was by no means such a phenomenon as Poe appeared to imagine” (Doyle, *Study in Scarlet* 11). This dismissal ironically points to the undeniable similarity between the characters. Holmes is the more fully realized Dupin.

It is telling not only that Holmes is an archetypal extension of Dupin, but also that he specifically points to the analytical talent and long meditative silences of his predecessor. What makes Dupin who he is, and what makes Holmes such an obvious version of the same type, is explicitly pointed out by Poe’s narrator in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” He notes that his friend Dupin has incredible powers of reasoning and once told him “that most men, in respect to himself, wore windows in their bosoms, and was wont to follow up such assertions by direct and very startling proofs of his intimate knowledge of my own.” (Poe 6). Dupin, he explains, seems to draw upon something almost like a super power. He becomes withdrawn and pale and his



voice changes, and after a period of time he completes his analysis and seems to know things he can't know. Dupin's analytical prowess is paired with abilities that border on mystical. The narrator writes, "Observing him in these moods, I often dwelt meditatively upon the old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul, and amused myself with the fancy of a double Dupin --the creative and the resolvent." (Poe 7). These two parts, the art and science of the detective, are an explicit nod to Poe's influences. Dupin has the analytical mind of a mathematician—the resolvent—and the tortured soul of an artist—the creative.

In Dupin, the Gothic and Romantic literature that preceded Poe form a unique mix with the scientific and social developments of the nineteenth century. This bi-part soul is an indelible part of the detective fiction that rapidly developed in the wake of Poe's stories, never more clearly than in the brilliant, drug abusing, eccentric Holmes. As Sean McCann argues, these detectives exist in a world bursting with potential clues and "it is the detective-genius who restores a sense of wholeness, order, and moral confidence . . . by proving the patterns that organize everyday life (McCann 89). Contemporary ideas about the aberrant nature of criminality and the stability of western liberalism are bound together in the world of classical detectives, and the characters at the heart of the genre remained much the same into the 1920s. Detective fiction critic Paul Skenazy suggests that the classical form of the genre began its most formulaic stage in the 1920s and 1930s England. Detectives like Agatha Christie's mustachioed Belgian, Hercule Poirot,<sup>1</sup> her Miss Marple, GK Chesterton's Father Brown,<sup>2</sup> and Dorothy

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<sup>1</sup> In his 1950 essay on detective fiction, the writer Raymond Chandler is deeply critical of the formula fiction of this so called Golden Age, and he points to the ridiculousness of Poirot's solution to the crime at the center of *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) as an example of what hardboiled detective fiction, including his own work, was casting itself against. He complains, "Poirot decides that since nobody . . . could have done the murder alone, everybody did it together, breaking the process down into a series of simple operations like assembling an egg beater . . . Only a halfwit could guess it" (Chandler, "The Simple Art" 5).

Sayer's Lord Peter Whimsley carried on the tradition of the classical detective in a form clearly indebted to Poe's original vision. Yet, as this classical form maintained both its formula and success, "a rowdy, bastardized, lower-class version of the detective and mystery story began to appear in the 1920s in America" (Skenazy 7). This new kind of mass produced, cheap "pulp" fiction introduced the world to the hardboiled detective. These new sleuths seem to bear little resemblance to their high class predecessors.

While classical detectives uncover crimes they attribute wholly to the individual failings of the perpetrators, hardboiled detectives reveal the systemic corruption motivating morally ambiguous criminals. Where classical detectives are eccentric and verbose, hardboiled detectives are gruff, no-nonsense, and understated. Hardboiled detectives were aimed at a largely male readership and were portrayed as stereotypically masculine in contrast to the more effete classical detectives who appreciated fine art and solved their problems without violence. In his introduction to Katherine Brocklebank's "Bracelets," Otto Penzler notes that readers "of *Black Mask*, as was true of all detective pulps, demonstrated in their letters to the editor that they didn't particularly care for either female protagonists or authors" (Penzler 322).<sup>3</sup> The gendered "manliness" of hardboiled detectives and outright misogyny were persistent features throughout the genre's most significant run. This was just one of hardboiled writers' many pointed changes to the detective tradition.

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<sup>2</sup> GK Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* (1908) draws on elements of detective fiction as well, but it was far from traditional. Often called a metaphysical thriller, it focuses on a case involving a secret anti-anarchist police group that is revealed to be filled with a number of undercover detectives.

<sup>3</sup> Few women were able to publish hardboiled detective fiction without a pseudonym. In the thirty-two-year history of *Black Mask*, only Brocklebank managed to get published in the magazine. Her series character, Tex of the Border Patrol, was a sort of cowboy/detective hybrid who appeared in four stories between 1928 and 1929.

Pioneers of the hardboiled genre consciously sought to differentiate their fiction from that of the classical era. John Cawelti convincingly argues that Dashiell Hammett, the genre's foremost innovator, ironically builds up "conventional literary moods and then punctures them with the flat, rasping cynicism of the private eye who has seen it all before and knows it is phony" (Cawelti, "Hammett, Chandler" 165). It appears then, at first glance, that the tradition of the classical creative and resolute detective is replaced by something altogether new. I contend, however, that the bi-part soul described by Poe continued to be an inextricable foundation of the fictional detectives of the hardboiled era. This specific type of duality originated in characters who served to affirm the unity of society, but it persisted in characters who served to reveal fundamental disunity. Such archetypal persistence reshapes the social critique of hardboiled writers, placing their characters within the very tradition they were meant to contrast.

Through different means, and with radically different aims, hardboiled writers like Hammett, Carroll John Daly, and Raymond Chandler created their own batch of detectives who were driven by the dissonance between their own creative and resolute natures.<sup>4</sup> That essential duality could not be so easily divorced from detective fiction, as it is in many ways linked to the contradictions at the heart of liberal capitalism. This positions classical detectives as uniquely suited to tracking down criminal ruptures in an otherwise just society, but these same traits make hardboiled detectives ideally suited to peel back the veneer of justness over a systemically corrupt society. The previously unexplored continuity of creative and resolute duality across these variations of the genre reveals that detectives are an enduring and exceptional literary type

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<sup>4</sup> Many men, and several women, produced hardboiled detective fiction in the 1920s and 30s, but Daly created the first hardboiled detective, and Hammett and Chandler are far and away the most well-known and influential writers in the genre.

not because of their deductive abilities, but because their very nature allows them to confront the specific contradictions of the capitalist liberal democracy that birthed them.

### The Creative and Resolvent: Dupin and Holmes

In order to follow the path of creative and resolvent duality across detective fiction, it is necessary to examine the cultural origins of the classical detective. While some scholars point to biblical tales or the works of Sophocles as the deeper genesis of detective fiction,<sup>5</sup> Poe ultimately founded the entire modern genre. John Cawelti definitively categorized the components of the enduring formula Poe introduced. While these components do not always appear in the same order and often blur together, Cawelti argues, “it is difficult to conceive of a classical story without . . . (a) introduction of the detective; (b) crime and clues; (c) investigation; (d) announcement of the solution; (e) explanation of the solution; (f) denouement” (Cawelti, “The Formula” 81-82). Beyond this consistent format, much of the character of the detective is indebted to dual intellectual influences. Poe’s three detective stories, Skenazy writes, “develop a tension between gothicism . . . and what Poe refers to in a letter as the ‘air of method,’ a veneer of scientific rationalism” (Skenazy 6). This tension manifests in the form of Dupin, an aloof gentleman who engages in detective work as a hobby. He is part Byronic hero, steeped in melancholy and mystery and “rather fantastic gloom” (Poe 6). He is also a scientific expert, armed with a mental archive of useful knowledge and astounding analytical ability. Sherlock Holmes, likewise, is a gentleman who does not need to work and engages in his craft simply

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<sup>5</sup> John Samuel Harpham specifically cites Oedipus as the first detective in literary history. He writes, “When Sophocles’s Oedipus determined to find the murderer of the former Theban king, Laius, in the fifth century BCE, the genre of detective fiction was born. The tamer of the Sphinx . . . was above all a master detective, and in this case he solved his mystery and got his man” (Harpham 121). Oedipus, of course, discovers he was the criminal he had been chasing, presaging the complicated relationship between modern detectives and their criminal targets.

because he enjoys it, providing him clear distance from both the personal motivations of the criminals he uncovers and the institutional nature of the local police. Like Dupin, he is defined by a mix of abstract eccentricities and analytical talent.<sup>6</sup>

Holmes is perhaps best known as a resolvent detective, armed with incredible powers of reasoning, an understanding of the emerging field of criminology, and obscure categorical knowledge. In one instance, he is able to advance in a case because of his almost computer-like awareness of various types of tobacco. But, in keeping with Poe's dual natured detective and as George Grella argues, Holmes "lives in state of bohemian disorder, smokes foul tobacco, relieves his chronic melancholia by playing the violin or taking cocaine, and even shoots a patriotic V.R. on his walls with a heavy calibre pistol" ("The Formal Detective Novel" 90). His creative side manifests in eccentricity, romantic despair, and drug use.<sup>7</sup> The latter is an outlet to help Holmes' cope with his own creative traits. Between the dearth of adequate cases and his frequent lack of an intellectual equal, the world often disappoints Holmes, and this marks him with the occasional air of resigned sadness. This abstract melancholy is a manifestation of Holmes' version of

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<sup>6</sup> The link between investigation and creative and resolvent traits may have its own deeper historical origin. In a wide ranging essay by Italian art historian Carlo Ginzburg, he traces a number of nineteenth century preoccupations with clue reading (e.g. detective work, art attribution, early psychoanalysis, semiotic medicine, etc.) back to the practices of pre-Neolithic hunters and the more recent, yet still ancient, practices of Mesopotamian divination and prophecy writing. Ginzburg lays out a sort of proto-creative and resolvent paradigm, writing, "The footprint represents a real animal which has gone past. By comparison with the actuality of the footprint, the pictogram is already a huge advance towards intellectual abstraction" (Ginzburg 14). The former example, methodologically determining events of the recent past, seems linked to resolvent traits. The latter example involves abstract or creative interpretations aimed at spiritually explaining the present and future.

<sup>7</sup> In Doyle's *The Sign of the Four*, Sherlock Holmes famously tells Watson he is injecting a "a seven-percent solution" of cocaine (Doyle, *The Sign* 1). Nicholas Meyer used this dosage as the title of his 1974 Holmes pastiche which features Sherlock recovering from cocaine addiction and crossing paths with Sigmund Freud.

“Dupin's romantic imbalance” (Skenazy 7). His creative traits lack Dupin’s mysticism,<sup>8</sup> and they often manifest in social failings.

Holmes lacks all interest in contemporary literature and current events, and as a result he is unable to engage in simple small talk. Watson even discovers that Holmes isn’t aware that the Earth revolves around the sun. Holmes justifies this by saying, “I consider that a man’s brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furnitures as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across . . .” (Doyle, *Study in Scarlet* 9). Here, the tension between Holmes’s creative and resolvent sides seems to reach its peak, and the two traits overlap. Holmes is so eccentric that he is unable to make small talk or engage in most common conversations, and he is also pragmatic to an inhuman degree, valuing only information that serves a specific logistical purpose.

Additionally, both Dupin and Holmes are defined by their obsession with detective work. This goes beyond a mere enjoyment of solving crimes and transcends into a sort of manic need for puzzles to solve. This side of the classical detective is linked with the nineteenth century aestheticization of crime.<sup>9</sup> In John Samuel Harpham’s study of this trend, he observes the new role some crime played in the public consciousness. He writes, “Many crimes . . . were indeed seen by critics, and on occasion even by the criminals themselves, as aesthetic statements, as exercises in the art of transgression for which no traditional motive for crime could account”

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<sup>8</sup> While I argue that the two detectives are aligned, it is clear that Holmes is less indebted than Dupin to Gothic influences. Dupin’s abilities stray closer to the supernatural, while Holmes is more the product of rapid technological advancement and the increasing “pressure of urban space” (Riley 912) in the 1880s.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas de Quincy’s 1827 satirical essay “On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts” was an early influence on this trend. It spawned a popular series of essays that were very influential on subsequent portrayals of crime. Of murder, de Quincy writes, “People begin to see that something more goes to the composition of a fine murder than two blockheads to kill and be killed—a knife—a purse—and a dark lane. Design, gentlemen, grouping, light and shade, poetry, sentiment, are now deemed indispensable to attempts of this nature” (de Quincy 1).

(Harpham 130). Dupin and Holmes both view crimes as aesthetic statements and often are obsessive in their shared compulsion to solve them. In Dupin's first adventure, he is overcome with fascination at the prospect of a double murder and decides to examine the crime scene, unsolicited. He says of investigating, "An inquiry will afford us amusement" (Poe 17). Dupin is not moved by empathy for the victims of the crime or the accused criminal, but rather because he is compelled by the seeming unsolvability of the locked room murder.

Holmes is similarly thrilled by the solving of crime and even goes so far as to express displeasure that there is too little crime and that the crime he does see isn't up to his standards. In his first appearance he complains that there are no crimes or criminals that offer him an appropriate challenge. He remarks, "There is no crime to detect, or, at most, some bungling villainy with a motive so transparent that even a Scotland Yard official can see through it" (Doyle, *Study in Scarlet* 12). Holmes yearns not only for crimes to solve, but also for ones which stimulate him. His creative nature demands crime that is appropriately poetic so he can engage with it critically. Crimes aren't mere acts of violence or injustice to Holmes and Dupin. They are complicated aesthetic objects worthy of criticism and analysis. Harpham writes, "The practice of detection requires not righteous outrage but a capacity for appreciation. Detective and criminal are thought to be dedicated to the perfection of their complementary crafts—the one as artist, the other as critic" (Harpham 134). Due to their socioeconomic class, and their incredible abilities, the detectives are not part of the common culture upon which crime is being inflicted. Holmes and Dupin are instead obsessive hobbyists offering a perspective that is neither that of the law nor the criminal. They are at their most creative when yearning for stimulating crimes, but they are at their most resolute when they actually engage with crimes worthy of their talents.

The analysis and deduction involved in literary detective work is so crucial to the genre that Poe opens his first Dupin story with an extended meditation on the subject. He writes that men like Dupin are “fond of enigmas, of conundrums, of hieroglyphics; exhibiting in his solutions of each a degree of acumen which appears to the ordinary apprehension preternatural” (Poe 3). Poe goes on to emphasize that what appears like intuition is actually the result of method. The detective’s mind is like a machine, making calculations so quickly and effectively that it appears to be beyond the capabilities of an ordinary mind.

This keen interest in method mirrors an ever growing interest in scientific rationalism, and the continual emergence of new radically innovative technologies. In Brendan Riley’s broad survey of detective fiction, he pays special attention to the influence of photography on Holmes. He writes:

It reigns in those details that fall beyond explanation in order to play to the sense of system that demands a legible urban space. Under Holmes’ regime, the world works as we imagine it should. In short, he operates photographically, often noticing all the details and reading the scene to Dr. Watson. (Riley 911)

This sense of the world working as it should was especially powerful in the nineteenth century as the emerging problems of urban complexity and widespread fears about the social order led to the emergence of the first professional police forces in major cities. London’s was established in 1829, and New York followed suit in 1837. In Wilber R. Miller’s book on early policing, he argues that one of the driving forces for the establishment of these forces was “the growing sense that the old informal social controls of hierarchy and neighborhood were breaking down as population expanded” (Miller 6). This paralleled a growing segregation of rich and poor—and a



belief in the inherent criminal nature of the lower classes and non-whites. Increasingly, the egalitarian rhetoric of liberalism was at odds with the socio-economic realities of industrial capitalism and urbanization. As inequity became more visible, individualist (rather than systemic) explanations arose, spurred on by a number of significant inventions.

The emergence of new technologies, such as photography and the electric telegraph,<sup>10</sup> and new civic and social institutions were accompanied by a pronounced interest in external characteristics as a measure of internal character. The discourse around this new interest often played out along class lines. This class tension is rarely explicitly dealt with in classical detective fiction the way it often is in later hardboiled writing. Instead, the classical detective implicitly addresses fears about urban crime by tracking down and outwitting criminals. Crucially, these classical era criminals aren't part said to be part of a larger social problem. The world of the classical detective is one that rejects social responsibility for problems and embraces individual criminality, especially among the lower classes. Riley notes that classical detective fiction "attribute[s] crimes to individuals, an important psychic salve for middle-class readers concerned with the rising rate of crime in urban centers . . . Classical detective stories re-enforce notions of individual responsibility, rational thought, and crime" (Riley 909). This criminal individuality often manifests in something almost resembling a parlor trick, in which stray details clue the detectives into deep truths about others.

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<sup>10</sup> Detectives themselves were a sort of innovation that had captured the popular imagination. In the introduction Kate Summerscale's book on the infamous 1860 Murder at Road Hill House, she writes that detectives "had become figures of mystery and glamor . . . Charles Dickens held them up as the models of modernity. They were as magical and scientific as the other marvels of the 1840s and 1850s- the camera, the electric telegraph and the railway train" (Summerscale XX).

Dupin displays this ability to the amazement of the narrator early in “Rue Morgue.” The two friends are walking through Paris, and Dupin makes a remark directly referencing a play the narrator happens to be thinking about. When the narrator is shocked, Dupin explains the exact process by which he was able to discern his friend’s unspoken thoughts. He explains:

As we crossed into this street, a fruiterer, with a large basket upon his head, brushing quickly past us, thrust you upon a pile of paving-stones . . . stepped upon one of the loose fragments) slipped, slightly strained your ankle, appeared vexed or sulky . . . You kept your eyes upon the ground --glancing, with a petulant expression, at the holes and ruts in the pavement, (so that I saw you were still thinking of the stones,) until we reached the little alley called Lamartine . . . Here your countenance brightened up . . . (Poe 6)

Dupin’s resolvent abilities are such that he is able to surmise the entire course of another’s thoughts by observing behavior, setting, and facial expressions.

Likewise, Holmes is able to discern people’s habits, occupation and guilt based on tiny surface details. In one instance, he says to a client, “Your right hand is quite a size larger than your left. You have worked with it, and the muscles are more developed” (Doyle, *Adventures* 20). This minor detail, the client’s cuffs, and Holmes’s knowledge of obscure tattoos tells Holmes everything he needs to know about the client’s profession, leisure activities, and travel habits. The client even remarks that it is obvious once it has been explained. This persistent strain of judging external qualities was driven by a unique contemporary blend of rapid scientific

advancements and oft-shifting—and later debunked—fields of study.<sup>11</sup> In Paul Hurh’s essay on the creative and resolvent, he notes that Poe’s conception of the resolvent “derives from early modern preoccupations with the nature of method that precede the calcification of the scientific method” (Hurh 471). Dupin, and his successors, are therefore inextricably linked not only with rationalism, but with an abundance of contemporary pseudo-scientific racial theorizing and later debunked fields such as phrenology.<sup>12</sup>

As many critics have noted, this model of detective work frequently supports hierarchical ideas about class and race. In classical detective fiction, this ultimately affirms the growing wealth and power gaps of industrial capitalism. Hierarchy is naturalized, and each person’s place within it seems the result of a rational system. Rosemary Jann, whose work is notably critical of Holmes as emblematic of hierarchical thinking, observes that ethnic stereotyping informs Doyle’s use of criminal and class typologies. Jann attributes this, in part, to “widespread interest in ‘racial’ differences in late Victorian science” (Jann 692). She accuses Doyle of furthering the notion that external characteristics can betray inherent criminality. Jann argues that in Holmes’ world, “signs of moral and intellectual ‘nature’ were indelibly inscribed on the surface of the body, and particularly on the face” (Jann 693). All of this serves to provide middle class readers with an understanding of the increasingly evident problems of economic progress under a rapidly industrializing capitalist system. In this vision of society, rather than investigating crime within a

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<sup>11</sup> Among the numerous discourses that influenced the genre in this way, one exemplary and often forgotten area of study was the Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet’s study of averages in the 1830s-50s. In the 1830s, calculating averages was common only in Quetelet’s main field, astronomy, but he took those principles and began to apply them to people. His work is often cited as deeply influential on contemporary criminology, and on ideas of normalcy. According to this line of thinking, “physical averages had a certain moral mandate” (Trufelman 2), bringing to mind the pseudo-methodical judgements classical detectives make based on physical features.

<sup>12</sup> In Matthew Pearl’s introduction to Poe’s Dupin trilogy, he notes that an earlier draft of “Rue Morgue” included an explicit reference to phrenology and its ability to map the analytical part of the brain. Of this, Pearl writes, “The notion presented here . . . allows Poe’s reader to imagine a physical locus for Dupin’s unique powers, which combine the apparent separate talents of imagination and calculation.” (Pearl xi).

broken system that inevitably produces criminality, detectives exist within a system that is sometimes endangered by visibly identifiable criminals whose failings are the result of visible traits.

Classical detectives stand at the intersection of the transforming class tensions of the mid-to-late nineteenth century and a new storytelling formula. As referenced above, there is a clear parallel between the rise of the literary detective and the rise of laissez-faire capitalist liberalism. Genre critic Sean McCann writes that detective fiction came into being “in a society . . . that had definitively traded its republican and agrarian legacy for a liberal, capitalist order.” Its popularity skyrocketed in the latter part of the nineteenth century “at a time when the rise of organized capitalism and the evident failure of the unfettered market to deliver a just society gave rise to the first serious challenges to liberalism . . .” (McCann 6). Within this context, the classical detective investigates disruptions of the inherently civilized order of liberal society. Their stories reaffirm the basic premise of classical liberal theories, that rational and self-interested individuals are motivated to form a fair and orderly society, by revealing potential evidence of societal failings to actually be personal ones.

In Holmes’s first appearance, he naturally discovers that the central murder “must have been a private wrong, and not a political one . . .” (Doyle, *Study in Scarlet* 58). In Doyle’s novel, there is no larger systemic wrong at the heart of crime, only personal failings. McCann argues “. . . for Doyle, murder does not truly question the liberal order, but only makes its virtues clear . . . tellingly in the ‘partnership’ of Watson and Holmes—an image of the free association at the core of civil society” (McCann 12). The classical detective tends to discover a unified culture that exists in spite of criminal interruptions to this unity. Holmes, Dupin, and their contemporaries take a broader ethnographic approach to uphold the larger order underneath the ground level

chaos of society. This desire to broadly map the social order results in detectives who strive for a nearly omniscient viewpoint.

Holmes, much like Dupin, seeks to see events from a higher vantage point, thus finding order in seeming chaos. He states that his ideal reasoner is one who would, “when he had once been shown a single fact in all its bearings, deduce from it not only all the chain of events which led up to it but also all the results which would follow from it” (Doyle, *Adventures* 62). This calls to mind Dupin’s ability to trace his friend’s entire thought process as if examining a series of links in a chain. Events are part of a unified order, and the criminal aberrations disrupting that order are glaring and can be traced back to their individual source if viewed with the proper perspective. McCann argues that these stories depict “a world in which freedom of the individual creates an anarchic or soulless society . . . where the law is corrupt, abstract, or impotent . . . only then to reverse that image by banishing a pair of scapegoats (murderer and victim) . . .” (McCann 8). Dupin and Holmes confront and reorder this stable world order by bringing to bear the full scientific expertise of their resolvent sides and the obsessive compulsions and eccentricities of their creative sides.

Those traits, along with their privileged social position, are essential for providing them with the outsider status necessary to “penetrate the seeming chaos and to discover within it the essential rationality of a civilized order”—an order, Skenazy argues, that Holmes “never seriously questions” (Skenazy 6). The genre’s first major evolution, hardboiled detective fiction, was in many ways built around seriously questioning the essential rationality of the civilized order and the individual responsibility of criminals. Yet, despite this stark difference, the creative

and resolute traits first cited by Poe persist throughout the hardboiled era, and they are put to use investigating a very different vision of society.

### These Mean Streets: Daly, Hammett, and Chandler

To best uncover the continuation of creative and resolute duality and the significance of its application to the concerns of the 1920s and 30s, it is necessary to first examine the cultural context from which hardboiled detective fiction emerged. After nearly a century of ever-increasing popularity, the genre began to undergo substantial transformation. An increasingly literate American working class had taken to pulp fiction.<sup>13</sup> Skenazy writes that the pulps were the “successors of the nineteenth-century pamphlets, broadsides, ‘penny dreadfuls,’ and dime novels which made stories available to the growing mass of literate working citizens” (Skenazy 8). The pulps had an overwhelmingly working class, male, urban readership and focused on escapist storytelling. Horror, crime, and westerns were mainstays, and into this literary realm stepped the hardboiled detective.

The first hardboiled detective was created by Carroll John Daly in 1923. “Three-Gun Terry” Mack appeared in the magazine *Black Mask*, the most significant publisher of early hardboiled detective stories,<sup>14</sup> in a story aptly titled “Three-Gun Terry.” It was Daly’s next hardboiled PI, Race Williams, who appeared later in the same year and became a minor sensation among *Black Mask* readers. Though he came second, Williams was “the first series

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<sup>13</sup> Pulps were so named because they were printed on the “cheapest most disposable grade of wood-pulp paper” (McCann 48). This was in sharp contrast to another emerging popular form: Technologically up to date “slicks”, which were glossy, color photo bearing magazines.

<sup>14</sup> In his introduction to a collection of *Black Mask* stories, Keith Allen Deutsch credits the magazine with not only introducing one of the quintessential American genres but also as being “the most universally acclaimed pulp fiction magazine” (Deutsch xix). Its impact on the popularity and expansion of hardboiled detective fiction is difficult to overstate.

detective of his kind” (Penzler 428). The character first appeared in “The Knights of the Open Palm,” a story in which he faces off against the local KKK in a fashion that harkens back to the hardboiled PI’s Western influences while looking forward to the urban conflicts that lay ahead for the genre.<sup>15</sup>

Although it takes place outside of the traditional urban setting of most future hardboiled private eye stories, “The Knights of the Open Palm” introduces much of the iconography of the genre. Williams describes himself as “the middleman—just a halfway house between the dicks and the crooks” (Daly 429). This harkens back to the classical detectives and their complicated relationship with crime, but it also introduces the slick idioms and directness that would in part define the genre. It also emphasizes that hardboiled detectives exist apart from both criminality and law enforcement. They are outsiders. The conflict between Williams and the Klan that the story introduces also reflects the complicated relationship between the real life rise of the Klan and the development of the hardboiled genre.

Daly’s story, and the genre it helped birth, shares peculiar links with the revitalization of the Ku Klux Klan during the first half of the 1920s.<sup>16</sup> If, as many critics have suggested, hardboiled detective fiction rose to prominence due to “disintegrating law, shifts in urban population, and the disruption of traditional social and familial patterns of behavior” (Skenazy

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<sup>15</sup> Much has been written by scholars on the connections between the uniquely American figures of hardboiled detective fiction and the Western genre. The protagonists of both genres are typically loners who are comfortable with professional violence and are suspicious of institutions. In John Cawelti’s seminal piece elaborating this genre comparison he writes, “For Indians and outlaws the hard-boiled detective story substitutes gangsters; for the frontier, the dark and dangerous streets where no man or woman can go in safety . . . the Western town and the city of the hard-boiled detective story are places of lawlessness, violence and inadequate social authority. Indeed, the kinship between the two genres was clear from the very beginning of the hard-boiled detective story . . .” (Cawelti, “The Gunfighter” 54).

<sup>16</sup> The KKK’s first iteration died out around the 1870s, but it was mythologized in D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, leading to a surge in popularity and a refounding of the Klan.

9), the Klan too traced *its* resurgence in popularity to the same social and demographic upheavals of 20th century America. The nativist ideals of the Klan were of such interest to the largely working class readers of pulps that *Black Mask* introduced a special issue of the magazine themed around debates over the Klan and continued to run a “Klan Forum” where readers could debate the KKK for the next six months. Daly’s Race Williams name seems an intentional choice to reference the forces against which he was cast—though it is worth noting that Williams confronts the Klan over its violence and corrupting influence more than its actual racism. Sean McCann convincingly argues that hardboiled detectives and Klansmen had a number of similarities. He writes “like hard-boiled heroes, Klansmen imagined that the only effective response to social ills was a form of vigilante justice that imposed order on the confusions of an urbanizing society” (McCann 40). This desire to impose traditional order calls to mind the function of classical detectives as restoring a vision of morality—albeit the morality of contemporary bourgeois norms. Like Dupin and Holmes, the Klan idealized a community of homogenized liberal ideals, free from the corrupting influence of ethnic and religious diversity and industrial greed.

Hardboiled detectives arose in response to these similar social pressures, but the stories in which they appear suggest different conclusions about society. In Daly’s story, “the basic qualities of the hard-boiled protagonist—his ability to move between law and crime, his ostensible commitment to self-interest, his fluency and wit—emerged specifically as weapons to be used against the Klan and its fantasies of moral and ethnic control” (McCann 45). These traits remained baked into hardboiled detectives long after the decline of the KKK. Despite similarities, Race Williams and his successors would reject a core aspect of the Klan’s ideology: the myth of community. The homogenized, just, orderly community ideal held up by Klansmen



was in direct opposition to the hardboiled detectives skepticism of liberal community. Community relationships and the order that springs from them, in Daly's story, are signs of corruption. After an early confrontation with the Klan in "Knights of the Open Palm," Williams is put on trial for shooting a Klansmen in self-defense. While the judge isn't a fan of the Klan's local influence, Williams notes that "The District Attorney was objecting to everything—I wasn't surprised—I'd heard that he was mighty close with the Klan" (Daly 439). The actions of the Klan are portrayed not as a positive community effort to maintain social and ethnic control but rather as blatant corruption and evidence of a social failing. Yet they are part of the system within which Williams must work.

The genre would move away from its early connection to the Klan, in large part because the Klan's influence and popularity greatly diminished as the 1920s went on. But the early dynamic of isolationist individualism versus nativist visions of homogenized order are apparent in the stories that follow Race Williams's first appearance. At the conclusion of "Knights of the Open Palm," Williams finishes his business with the Klan and proclaims that he is "booked for the city" (Daly 441), almost as if he is announcing the direction the entire genre will turn in his wake. Williams began by battling the nativist rhetoric of the Klan, and in doing so he banishes many aspects of the classical detective genre. New challenges were arising that called into question the validity of liberalism's rhetorical promises. The next stage in hardboiled detective fiction would see writers, including Daly, grapple with new kinds of economic inequity, increased urbanization, and shifting demographics. Fueled by these influences, one of the genre's foundational writers, Dashiell Hammett, created two important hardboiled detectives.

Hammett's first contribution to the genre was a short story titled "Bodies Piled Up" which married the classical locked room mystery with the violence and idiomatic dialogue of the hardboiled genre. In the story, traces of classical creative and resolute duality juxtapose with the soon to appear hardboiled version. Hammett would go on to write a number of stories centered around the Continental Op. The Op—so called because he is an operative for a San Francisco based agency—is never given a proper name, and he refuses "to be constrained by the claims of inheritance, by the demands of community or law, or by the restrictions of conventional morality" (McCann 62). Hammett created a character uniquely suited to allow for critique of the ideological underpinnings of classical liberalism. In Hammett's first novel, *Red Harvest*, the Op goes to investigate a case in a corrupt mining town and discovers a town that appears on the surface to be a classic American community but is almost comically rife with corruption.<sup>17</sup> The novel begins with the Op arriving in Personville and discovering that the man who hired him, Donald Willsson, has already been killed. The setup perfectly displays the new role of detective fiction, as a classical detective would eventually resolve Willsson's murder and restore a sense of community and order. The Op's presence in the town accomplishes the exact opposite, and tidy resolution becomes increasingly impossible.

The Op is nearly assassinated by the corrupt police chief and does battle with a number of crooked cops and gang members. At one point, criminals are let out of jail to commit a bank robbery in broad daylight and later use the fact of their incarceration as an alibi. The Op is even given a check "to cover the cost of investigating crime and corruption in Personville" (Hammett, *Red Harvest* 40) but it is revealed to be something more akin to a bribe. The very foundation of

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<sup>17</sup> Personville, or "Poisonville" as the Op repeatedly calls it, harkens back to a Western setting. Like a Western, the lone hero eventually solves his problems through a number of gunfights. Hammett seems to be tapping into the common Western theme of regeneration through violence.

Personville is rotten, and the Op emphasizes numerous times that the city had earned its nickname of Poisonville. The city is portrayed as damning evidence of the failure of community and mutually beneficial self-interest. Christopher Bentley notes, “In *Red Harvest* we never meet an honest businessman or an honest policeman, and the only lawyer is a blackmailer” (Bentley 67). It’s as if Personville is entirely inhabited by criminals. The city itself seems to drive the Op towards madness, suggesting that the corrupt society has a parallel corrupting influence that inevitably leads to violence. At one point, the Op says “This damned burg's getting me. If I don't get away soon I'll be going blood-simple like the natives. There's been what? A dozen and a half murders since I've been here” (Hammett, *Red Harvest* 93). Hammett seems to be suggesting that failing social community doesn’t just lead to corruption but also to an outright descent into violent power struggles. *Red Harvest*, in particular, is marked by pessimism that human nature allows for any of the high-minded ideals of liberalism. It casts “doubt on the project of reform” (McCann 79), offering visions of change only through extreme vigilante violence. The soon to arrive New Deal promises of a reformed liberalism seem far-fetched in the world of *Red Harvest*, as human greed is too deeply entrenched, and capitalism has rendered the promises of liberal democracy too unlikely.

Personville is not Holmes’s London or Dupin’s Paris, where criminality can be fully uncovered and categorized. It is a tainted, irredeemable place that plainly displays societal failings and moral decay. Mining magnates, gangsters, and crooked law enforcers blend together in a corrupt stew. Hardboiled writer Raymond Chandler wrote of Hammett as a monumental influence on bringing a realist bent to crime fiction, and he specifically cites pervasive corruption as a key feature. He writes, “The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants

are owned by men who made their money on brothels . . . ” (Chandler, “The Simple Art” 8). Such a description might as well be specifically about Personville. While Daly’s story had a corrupt AG, Race Williams also mentions that the judge seems to stand for justice. Hammett’s stories, especially his first novel, push skepticism of the law and of social organization even further, offering few decent, upstanding figures of authority.

Hammett’s most famous detective, Sam Spade,<sup>18</sup> continued the detective’s trend towards isolation and detachment. *The Maltese Falcon* opens with Spade not working for any agency and beholden only to a partner who dies in the early stages of the plot. He develops feelings for a femme fatale but must forsake her in order to maintain his own personal code<sup>19</sup>—a reflection of his creative side, as I will later argue. As Skenazy writes, “Hammett opens this most famous of his novels by creating his detective’s separation from all business associations, and ends it by having Spade deny his love for and allegiance to the woman who, as killer, made this independence possible” (Skenazy 20). Hammett’s version of the genre, arguably the most influential, was especially skeptical of the liberal promise of mutually self-interested individuals building a just and orderly society of inherent rationality and fairness. As McCann writes, “In the world of Hammett’s fiction, one can experience freedom only at the cost of someone else’s limitation” (McCann 90). His hardboiled detectives, as a result, are detached and defined by skepticism, not only of the criminals they pursue, but of the underpinnings of the entire society within which they operate.

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<sup>18</sup> Despite the huge success and popularity of *The Maltese Falcon*, Sam Spade appears in no other Hammett novels and is in only four short stories (one of which was not published until 2013). The Continental Op, on the other hand, remains far less well known yet appeared in two Hammett novels and dozens of short stories. Spade’s enduring popularity and name recognition may be attributable to the 1941 adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon* which starred Humphrey Bogart as the detective.

<sup>19</sup> The dangerous, deceitful women that often populate hardboiled detective novels are themselves an enduring, gendered, archetype with a long history.

Chandler's hardboiled fiction was, by his own admission, influenced by Hammett's. Many of his novels and stories in the genre were published in the 1940s and all the way through the late 1950s when writers of hardboiled detective fiction were introducing new innovations. Still, during the 1930s he wrote a number of stories for *Black Mask* and a novel, *The Big Sleep*, that share a substantial number of qualities with the earliest hardboiled fiction. His most famous detective, Philip Marlowe<sup>20</sup>, was a loner beholden to no one, but unlike Spade, his streetwise facade is a defensive mechanism to shield him from the melancholy and disappointment of a corrupt world that constantly reveals its ugliness. In a later novel, Marlowe is referred to as "the shop-soiled Galahad" (Chandler, *The High Window*, 107), a reference to Chandler's own description of his hero as a knight errant—a figure from chivalric romance literature. This description—along with his version of melancholy—will be key for understanding the creative side of Marlowe, but it also emphasizes the changes Chandler introduced to the hardboiled detective. Of these changes Cawelti writes, "Chandler was unable to accept Hammett's bleak pessimism. He saw the corruption and violence of the modern city, not as an inescapable human condition, but as a result of American materialism and greed" (Cawelti, "Hammett, Chandler" 176). Marlowe is a bit more of a heroic figure, striving to protect his own honor. Yet, he still fits the mold of Spade and Williams, in both his dialogue and his approach to detective work.

Marlowe, compared to his predecessors, has a stronger sense of common decency and compassion for its own sake, as in *The Big Sleep*, when he scolds the heiress Vivian Sternwood for how she's treated her father and handled the case. He says:

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<sup>20</sup> Before introducing Marlowe by name into his fiction, Chandler used a number of interchangeable detectives who all bear a resemblance to his famous private eye. Their stories are now often cited as Marlowe stories. As Penzler explains, "After he achieved success with the publication of his first novel . . . the stories were collected in several volumes and the protagonists' names were all changed to Marlowe" (Penzler 867).

I risk my whole future, the hatred of the cops . . . I dodge bullets and eat saps, and say thank you very much, if you have any more trouble, I hope you'll think of me, I'll just leave one of my cards in case anything comes up. I do all this for twenty-five bucks a day-and maybe just a little to protect what little pride a broken and sick old man has left in his blood . . . (Chandler, *The Big Sleep* 217-218)

Marlowe ends the novel in isolation, but along the way he develops a genuine kinship with the ailing General who hires him. He looks out for General Sternwood's interests as a matter of professional obligation, but he seeks numerous times to spare the old man pain out of nothing more than a sense of it being the decent thing to do. For Chandler, Skenazy writes, "even within the inverted and immoral patterns of experience the contemporary world offers, a kind of epic meaning remains, as well as a need for a 'hero'" (Skenazy 33). Chandler regularly undercuts this heroism, and Marlowe pokes fun at his own nature, but he still finds himself unable to embrace total detachment.

Spade, on the other hand, loses his only real connection at the start of the novel, and he later openly admits he disliked his partner and is unaffected by his murder. He simply pursues justice for the killing, in his words, because "[w]hen a man's partner is killed he's supposed to do something about it . . . when one of your organization gets killed it's bad business to let the killer get away with it" (Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* 214). Marlowe is not facing a world less corrupt or morally decayed than that of Spade, but his deeper range of feeling does signal an evolution of the hardboiled detective type introduced by Daly in 1923. Daly, Hammett, and Chandler's fiction represent different stages of intra-genre development of the detective

archetype, but their characters all retain clear links to the major developments of the 1920s and 30s.

### Creative, Resolvent, and Hardboiled

At one point in his essay on detective fiction, Chandler seems to stumble across the unifying link of creative and resolvent duality, but he moves past the significance of this discovery. In lamenting the scourge of bad detective fiction, he suggests that the writers themselves fall short for failing to personally embody two contrary traits. He argues that detective fiction “demands a combination of qualities not found in the same mind. The coolheaded constructionist does not also come across with lively characters, sharp dialogue, a sense of pace, and an acute use of observed detail. The grim logician has as much atmosphere as a drawing board” (Chandler, “The Simple Art”). His comparisons mirror the creative and resolvent traits of classical and hardboiled detectives. Chandler stops short of using Poe’s exact phrasing, but he suggests that the very same dual nature that defines Dupin is essential to the genre. For Chandler, the best writers of hardboiled detective fiction must be able to tap into both creative and resolvent energies, as their characters must use both to navigate their worlds. The writers themselves need a strong grasp on creative and resolvent duality if they are to create effective literary detectives capable of grappling with both their cases and the stories’ larger themes. What this reveals about the genre is significant in that it posits detectives as almost superhuman in their ability to unify contradictory ideas.

A crucial difference between classical and hardboiled era detectives is how they ultimately interact with those contradictory ideas. Classical detectives usually resolve obvious contradictions. The stories in which they appear almost always ends in a tidy resolution with

problematic characters written off as personally flawed and bound for prison or death.

Contrarily, hardboiled detectives highlight the contradictions they find as evidence of broader problems. Their cases rarely end in satisfaction, and often the best the detectives can hope for is to avoid being killed or framed for a crime they did not commit. Writers of hardboiled detective fiction reject holistic resolution and “emphasize the unlikelihood of mutual agreement or common understanding” (McCann 118). In spite of this fundamental disparity, hardboiled detectives possess and rely upon, the same core creative and resolvent duality of their classical forebears.

Spade and Marlowe are especially exemplary of the many variations of hardboiled detectives, and it is instructive to take a closer look at which of their traits display continuity with Poe’s creation. These links are a bit easier to spot on the resolvent side of the spectrum. One such piece of evidence lies in the speech patterns of hardboiled detectives. Cawelti writes, “Hammett’s pervasively flat, hard-edged, and laconic vernacular style . . . runs against the breathless excitement of his stories. Even the most fantastic episodes retain the solid, cold, slightly tired tone in which Hammett’s detectives narrate their adventures. Everything is calmly weighed and measured” (Cawelti, “Hammett, Chandler” 166). Hammett’s detectives exist in what are ostensibly action stories, yet they remain calculating under extreme pressure, analyzing outcomes rather than dealing with emotion. Their success relies upon their ability to act rationally in threatening situations.

Near the conclusion of *The Maltese Falcon*, the novel’s antagonist, Gutman, is holding Spade captive. Under these tense circumstances, Spade refuses to play along with Gutman’s plan to leave the police with no information about the murders that have resulted from the case. Spade



proceeds to argue with his captors at gunpoint, explaining to them the exact steps all involved must take to get out of the situation. He is, outwardly at least, unfazed by the danger, telling Gutman he could easily disarm whichever of his henchmen he wants to give over to the police. He says, “I hope you’re not letting yourself be influenced by the guns these pocket-edition desperadoes are waving” (Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* 184). The frightening reality of the situation has everyone on edge but Spade. He calmly asserts the most logical long-term solution, and even manages to hurl an insult for good measure. Beyond merely talking his way out of the immediate situation, he considers the long-term ramifications of neglecting the police,<sup>21</sup> telling Gutman, “I want to be all set to march into headquarters pushing a victim in front of me, saying: ‘Here, you chumps, is your criminal!’ As long as I can do that I can put my thumb to my nose and wriggle my fingers at all the laws in the book” (Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* 176). The criminal he mentions is one of the two men pointing guns at Spade. Even in their presence, he calmly explains to the group that the most logical play is to present one of them as a scapegoat. The peril of the situation does not prevent Spade from acting hyper rationally.

Hardboiled detectives’ resolute nature goes beyond remaining logical in dangerous situations. They often display analytical powers to rival those of classical detectives. Both Spade and Marlowe put a streetwise spin on the trope of reading potential suspects and their actions. In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe outwits a femme fatale who asks him to teach her to shoot a gun. Marlowe recognizes that her behavior matches a mysterious death from earlier in the novel and

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<sup>21</sup> Spade’s relationship with the police, like many hardboiled PIs, is fraught throughout the novel as he is immediately a suspect in his partner’s murder. While Holmes and Dupin looked at the police as well intentioned but lacking methodology, hardboiled detectives were often outright hostile towards the justice system. In this climactic scene, Spade lays out the complicated give and take he must maintain with the cops. He insists that he’s defied the police many times but has always known “a day of reckoning was coming” (Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* 176) and that if he fails to appease them, they’ll find an excuse to arrest him next time he skirts the law.

turns the tables on her by loading her gun with blanks. He explains his deduction by saying, “I was thinking of the day Reagan disappeared . . . he took her down to those old wells to teach her to shoot and put up a can somewhere and told her to pop at it and stood near her while she shot. And she didn’t shoot at the can. She turned the gun and shot him, just the way she tried to shoot me to-day, and for the same reason” (Chandler, *The Big Sleep* 216). Marlowe recognizes a pattern of behavior in his case and outwits his attempted murderer. Marlowe seemingly repeats a version of Dupin’s trick, explaining someone’s entire reasoning, merely through observation and methodological analysis. Spade, likewise, is able to explain to criminals their reasoning and past actions with deadly accuracy.

At the conclusion of the *The Maltese Falcon*, Spade has seen through Brigid O’Shaughnessy, his client and lover, and her numerous lies. He lays it out for her step by step, explaining:

You wanted to be sure the shadower was somebody you knew and who knew you, so they’d go with you. You got the gun from Thursby that day . . . You had already rented the apartment at the Coronet. You had trunks there and none at the hotel and when I looked the apartment over I found a rent-receipt dated five or six days before the time you me you rented it . . . If Thursby was the one then you were rid of him. If Miles was, then you could see that Floyd was caught and you’d be rid of him . . . and when you found that Thursby didn’t mean to tackle him you borrowed the gun and did it yourself. (Hammett 210)

Spade’s resolute observations lack the nineteenth preoccupation with physical traits and external features betraying the true nature of things, and they are only presented in retrospect.

While the classical version of this feat is sudden and predictive, the hardboiled version sees the detective analyzing details of locations and the actions of suspects to produce a similar result. Spade deduces not only a rationale for Brigid's actions but also the specifics of her thought process. This ability is clearly related to the resolvent skills of classical detectives, but the lineage of creative traits is less clear. For most hardboiled detectives, it is buried beneath their gruff, withholding personalities.

Marlowe's creative side is easier to spot because of Chandler's explicit conception of his hero as a knight errant. Marlowe sticks to a personal code that is indebted to Romantic ideals, but his Romantic concept of honor is constantly challenged by the world he encounters. Cawelti describes Marlowe as "a reluctant and ambiguous knight engaged in an obscure quest for a grail whose value he could never completely articulate" (Cawelti, "Hammett, Chandler" 177). While this inability to verbalize his sensitivity to injustice is not quite the same as the eccentricity of Holmes or Dupin, it is similarly abstract and distances Marlowe from normal social interactions. Marlowe's personal code and sense of honor are the embodiments of his creative half.

In one instance, Marlowe returns to his apartment to discover the daughter of his client naked in his bed. His relationship with her is an uneasy, unclear one and it complicates the case. Despite his attraction, Marlowe turns away and demands she get dressed. Rather than watch, he focuses on a chess board in a moment that is both lyrical and symbolic. He narrates, "I looked down at the chessboard. The move with the knight was wrong. I put it back where I had moved it from. Knights had no meaning in this game. It wasn't a game for knights" (Chandler, *The Big Sleep* 152). This metaphor is less than subtle, positioning Marlowe as a knight with a code of honor that separates him from the world in which he participates. It is neither practical nor a tool

for detective work but rather a creative character trait. He comes across to others as odd or off putting in his judgements, and his abstractly motivated purity and skepticism of both wealth and authority alienates him from the police, the criminal world, and the wealthy.

Marlowe's dialogue provides further insight into his creative depths. Chandler evolved the style of earlier hardboiled writers with his trademark use of simile. For example, early in the 1940 novel *Farewell, My Lovely*, Marlowe describes a character by saying "Even on Central Avenue, not the quietest dressed street in the world, he looked about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food" (Chandler, *Farewell* 1). These stylistic flourishes, which are sometimes parodied in modern portrayals of hardboiled fiction, are more than simple literary tricks. They open a window into Marlowe's creative way of processing his world. Skenazy writes:

. . . the simile overpowers the environment, reducing it to comparable, and therefore comprehensible, size. Such use of the imagination also thickens the meaning of the urban world , expanding its range of implications. Nothing is only itself. We are reminded that we live in concrete and jungles, reality and dream, the known and the barely conceived. The similes provide a swinging door between limit and possibility. (Skenazy 42)

Although Marlowe's work requires him often to act directly and consider things as they are, he engages with the world through abstract comparisons. Whereas Dupin and Holmes seem to seek a creative outlet in their aesthetic appreciation of crimes, Marlowe's use of language provides him creative opportunities. He lacks Holmes's eccentricities and Dupin's gleeful desire for

amusing crime, but Marlowe makes up for it with comparative language and a melancholy spirit not unlike Dupin's "rather fantastic gloom" (Poe 6).

Chandler's use of the first person voice provides the reader with access to these aspects of Marlowe,<sup>22</sup> but no such access exists for the heart, mind, or soul of Sam Spade. *The Maltese Falcon* is written in the third person and the reader is kept at a distance from Spade—that is, he's only characterized through dialogue and action. Unlike some of his fictional contemporaries and successor, there are fewer obvious examples of Spade displaying creative traits. There is, however, one standout moment in the novel in which Spade drifts into the realm of abstract thinking. He relates the tale of a former case in which he tracked a man named Flitcraft who had abandoned his family after a near death experience and then eventually started a very similar life elsewhere. Hammett summarizes what the story means to Spade when he refers to the near death experience by saying:

It was not, primarily, the injustice of it that disturbed him: He accepted that after the first shock. What disturbed him as the discovery that in sensibly ordering his affairs he had got out of step, and not into step, with life. He said he knew before he had gone twenty feet from the fallen beam that he would never know peace again until he had adjusted himself to this new glimpse of life . . . I don't think he even knew he had settled back naturally into the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma. But that's the part I

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<sup>22</sup> First person storytelling was extremely common in hardboiled detective fiction. Daly utilized it in his Race Williams story. Specifically, the narrator was often the detective himself. This was a significant change from the stories of Dupin and Holmes whose tales, except for two Sherlock narrated Holmes stories published in 1926, were narrated by their sidekicks. Skenazy writes, "The Watson figure of Doyle disappears, replaced by the voice of the detective himself. Vision and morality unite in the isolated perceiver, introducing us to his world in his own terms" (Skenazy 9-10).

always liked. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling. (Hammett 64)

Cawelti argues that this story is Hammett reckoning with a stark “vision of cosmic treachery” (“Hammett, Chandler” 167). The scene reveals in Spade a previously unseen interest in the metaphysical.

Critics have read this parable numerous ways, arguing that it reveals Spade to be everything from an existentialist to a nihilist who rejects emotional ties. Either way, this unprompted story uncovers within Hammett’s protagonist a previously unseen contemplation of life’s abstractions. There is nothing pragmatic or logical about the story, but he is moved by the actions of a stranger, as they speak to him on some quasi-spiritual level. He tells Brigid that he is able to understand Flitcraft’s abstract reasoning, even though many others couldn’t. Like Holmes before him and Marlowe after him, Spade has a distinguishable set of creative traits. This traceable lineage of creative and resolvent duality has been little discussed, and there has been even less discussion of its implications.

### Capitalist Liberalism: A Lousy Racket

Creative and resolvent traits undoubtedly link the first and second iterations of literary detectives, but it is also essential to note their many differences. Hardboiled detectives are in many ways the descendants of the lone rangers of Westerns and the tough guys of urban crime fiction. They are men of few words, while classical detectives are often loquacious and prone to monologuing. They are familiar with violence, while the classical detective rarely wields a weapon or finds himself knocked unconscious by a gang of criminals. Most importantly, hardboiled detectives are working class, while most classical detectives are members of the

upper-middle class or upper class. Marlowe writes that the prototypical hardboiled detective “is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people” (Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder” 4). Detectives like Williams, Spade, and Marlowe are infused with a working-class ethos, and they do not see the world from the privileged perch of Dupin and Holmes.

Classical and hardboiled detectives have fundamentally different motivations. In the classical era, “the detective is not motivated by duty, money, love, or fame” (Harpham 132). They have no need of earning income from their investigations. Dupin is the descendant of a great noble family and has come upon supposedly hard times due to unspecified events. Yet, “by courtesy of his creditors, there still remained in his possession a small remnant of his patrimony” (Poe 6). This patrimony is substantial enough that Dupin collects rare books and does not work. His rent is paid for by the narrator, and he has no obligations. Holmes is a gentleman who often works for free and spends his time bemoaning the lack of adequately challenging criminal cases. Spade, on other hand, runs a small business with his partner and has a secretary who must be paid. He is focused on promised payments throughout *The Maltese Falcon*. In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe tells General Sternwood, ““I get twenty-five a day and expenses—when I'm lucky” (Chandler, *The Big Sleep* 19). His livelihood is inextricably bound to the cases he works. Both men are regularly tempted with bribes to stray from their codes of honor, and the choice to reject them is always to their short-term disadvantage.

This fundamental class difference is central to opposite social messaging of both sub-genres. The privileged economic status of the classical detectives often defines their worldview. In Holmes’s world, for example, “The ‘individuality’ of clients and criminals is equally subject

to specifying codes, codes that in turn assume the existence of fixed behavioral types” (Jann 687). Corruption and systemic inequity cannot be to blame when the codes of class, gender, and ethnicity explain the failings of the criminals Dupin and Holmes pursue. The criminal is both personally responsible for their actions and grouped by specifying codes into a pre-judged category. This is instructive when considering Chandler’s description of the setting in which hardboiled detectives exist. He writes of “a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket . . .” (Chandler, “The Simple Art” 8). While bootleg liquor was not a concern in Dupin or Holmes’s times, the basic premise is easily translatable. The judge, likely a man of economic privilege, is able to freely engage in criminal behavior while determining the punishment for an ostensibly lower-class person arrested for a lesser, though related, crime.

To a classical detective fitting Jann’s model, the man with the pint in his pocket, by the nature of his socioeconomic class, is inherently criminal. There is no great injustice in sending him to jail. The judge, on the other hand, is an institutional figure of authority whose personal actions matter less than his fixed behavioral type. The resolvent detective is able to analyze basic features about each person and assign them to a category. Class is inextricably bound to criminality, and classical detectives reaffirm that people are bound to repeat inherited patterns of behavior based on “deterministic codes of class, gender, and ethnicity” (Jann 686). These codes insulate the system and those benefiting from it from critique and uphold the rhetorical values of liberalism. The hardboiled detectives, on the other hand, don’t adhere to these codes, mingling with the diverse and “manifold social levels and complexities of a modern city” (Cawelti, “The Gunfighter” 54). As a result, they uncover an economy worthy of critique and liberal values that have succumbed widespread corruption. Their resolvent abilities are not a tool for categorizing



people but for rationally assessing economic and civic failures. People cannot be so easily categorized in the hardboiled era. The criminals' specificities and their motives aren't incidental, and they were not born follow deterministic codes. They are people responding to a series of economic and social realities.

Classical and hardboiled detectives each operate outside normal rules of etiquette and behavior as a feature of their creative sides, but even this outsider-ness seems to have nearly opposite implications for the two sub-genres. The classical detective is marked as different by their eccentricity, their melancholy, and their artistic passion for aesthetically pleasing crime. Their detachment from "regular" people is borne of personality rather than principle. The hardboiled detective creative side manifests in a personal code, and that personal code prohibits the detective from engaging in both the often corrupt business of law enforcement and the seedy world of crime. In effect, this gives them the necessary distance to act as capable critics of capitalist liberalism's status quo.<sup>23</sup>

Hardboiled detectives do not necessarily lack sociability (though many do) but are rather inherently skeptical. Riley writes, "Holmes enforces civilized rules and values while Marlowe bolsters the notion of individual morality standing against a corrupt culture" (Riley 910). Those rules and values are representative of rhetoric of liberalism and, though they were undoubtedly different in each era, the more fundamental difference is in the detectives' views on the functions of those rules. To a man like Holmes, the civilized rules and values of society seem vital, fair and

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<sup>23</sup> Hammett's fiction is more pointedly anti-capitalist than Chandler's, as Hammett was more politically radical. In 1951, his "allegiance to Communism brought him six months in a federal prison" (Bentley 55). Hammett refused to give up the names of donors to the Civil Rights Congress legal defense fund that provided bail money to accused communists. He invoked his Fifth Amendment rights and was charged with contempt of court. Regarding the influence of Hammett's politics on his fiction, Bentley writes, "Though he probably did not become a Communist until 1937 or 1938, it is in his earliest writing that his radicalism is most evident" (Bentley 55).

generated as the result of “the victory of public knowledge and civic solidarity over the dangers of private desire” (McCann 4). He does not question the underlying fairness of the industrial capitalist society he inhabits, as he has maintained a privileged position within that system. Individuals, so says the rhetoric of liberalism, can act in their own self-interest, compromise where they must, and succeed. To Holmes, a man who does not have to worry about the market for his services or the fiscal consequences of failing to solve a case, this seems a reasonable proposition. He is talented, lives comfortably, and pursues his interests full time. Criminality does not speak to a crumbling system. Rather, it disrupts the system that has allowed Holmes to thrive.

Spade and Marlowe, contrarily, are not part of the class benefitting from the structure of society.<sup>24</sup> Those same rules and values, and the institutions that uphold them, are inadequate to provide a just and fair society. The liberal ideal that there is “no strife or dissension that could not be absorbed by a healthy civil society” (McCann 4) is rendered ridiculous in the face of the economic realities of the twentieth century capitalism. Marlowe works for a living, and he doesn’t make much despite being an extremely talented detective. He does not have the luxury of yearning for especially interesting crimes. He needs to get his daily rate and expenses paid. This opens him to the possibility that the whole economic system might be inherently broken in important ways. Holmes and Dupin can go where they please and do as they please, and their

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<sup>24</sup> Though the complicated racial elements of hardboiled detective fiction are beyond the scope of this paper, this is not to say that Spade and Marlowe do not benefit from racial privilege. They are white men, and they rarely if ever comment on racial inequality. Chandler’s *Black Mask* story “Try the Girl” opens with a racially motivated killing, and Marlowe is not particularly troubled by it. He even develops a soft spot for the killer. The genre’s racism and misogyny is inexcusable, though McCann suggests “these were never incidental aspects of the fiction. Rather . . . they were core features of the attempts made by the genre’s writers to imagine answer to the problems of American literature . . . and liberalism” (McCann 308). Though my essay is mostly focused on the positive elements of the hardboiled critique of liberalism it is imperative to note the genre’s lack of diversity and frequently objectionable portrayals of racial minorities and women.

talents are well rewarded as a fact of their lifelong socioeconomic status. Marlowe and Spade, on the other hand, are extremely talented but never able to earn their way into economic comfort. Every opportunity to earn significant money comes attached with a bribe or criminal conspiracy, or it is an act of deceit. The system does not reward their specialized skills or bravery. Encounters with wealth usually reveal corruption and criminality, not hard workers being fairly compensated and climbing the socioeconomic ladder.

The hardboiled writers don't offer the orderly, just community of the classical detectives, and their detectives harbor no illusions about the system's efficacy. The hardboiled world, McCann writes, is meant to reflect "a nation that was harshly divided between rich and poor, the powerful and weak, and that at the same time did not appear to have the leadership or the state capacity to render its capitalist economy more secure, let alone more just" (McCann 307). Fittingly, hardboiled detectives often navigate numerous strata of society and engage with the entire spectrum of unequal wealth and power.

Spade and Marlowe regularly cross the economic lines of their cities, and they are able to penetrate both high society and the criminal underclass. In the first few chapters of *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe encounters "the millionaire General Sternwood . . . a pornographer named Arthur Gwynn Geiger, a cheap hoodlum and his moll, a seductive bookstore salesgirl, an old friend from the district attorney's office and a miscellaneous cast of policemen and grifters. (Cawelti, "The Gunfighter" 54). The novel's structure gives Marlowe a broader, systemic view of his case. He is not tracking down a resolvable anomaly like a classical detective, but is instead sifting through the fundamentally disordered society Chandler presents, uncovering further mysteries and injustices at each stage. Societal critique comes to feel almost inevitable. The

text's aesthetic framing of Marlowe's creative and resolvent duality is especially attuned to all the ways the capitalist system he is participating in fails to live up to the rhetoric of liberal democracy.

Marlowe and Spade's creative personal codes make them keenly aware of the false promises of community and equality. Their resolvent abilities, likewise, allow them to analyze how their cases are interwoven with the capitalist underpinnings of liberal democracy. Unfair rackets, schemes, and rip offs perpetrated against normal people litter their stories. Their working-class status and constant engagement with all levels of society lead to an inevitable critique of the institutions represented in the classical era as inherently good. McCann writes that in the hardboiled era, "the detective story would no longer be about the way that social consensus was threatened and recreated, but about the way in which people could be shaped, molded and manipulated by the very institutions and beliefs that once seemed transcendent . . . ." (McCann 111). Even though creative and resolvent duality first arose in detectives who subscribed to the transcendence of those institutions and beliefs, it turned out to be the tool hardboiled detectives would display the blind spots of the classical era.

### Conclusion

The creative and resolvent duality first introduced by Poe has proven to be remarkably persistent, notable for creating "a conceptualization of scientific discourse and poetic imagination as two expressions of a single method" (Hurh 471). This combination first manifested in the original classical detective, Dupin, and it reached its most recognizable form in Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. This same dual nature, or "bi-part soul", took on new meaning with the emergence of the hardboiled detective in the 1920s. Race Williams, the Continental Op, Sam

Spade, Philip Marlowe, and their contemporaries were created in a different era with different aims, and the aesthetic presentations of their split natures differ radically from the classical detective. Yet, they display a particular blend of analytical reasoning and abstract Romanticism that can be traced back to Poe's original formulation.

These traits, along with the nature of their work, render these detectives as both eternal outsiders and consummate insiders. The hardboiled detectives of the 1920s and 30s walk a line between law and criminality. They are neither brute nor pushover. They access fabulous mansions, seedy gambling dens, criminal fronts, legal institutions, and everything in between with an equal blend of ease and discomfort. Their profession grants them access to all strata of society, and their outsider status provides them with the distance to offer judgement on what they find. Crucially, their split nature reflects the contradictions at the heart of western liberalism. Rhetorical ideals and economic reality are at constant odds in fiction of the hardboiled writers. The notion that mutual self-interest insured "everyone had a good reason to accept the minimal demands of sociability, responsibility, and self-control that society placed on its members" (McCann 7) was made suspect by the ever-expanding corruption and wealth inequality of industrial capitalism and the growing racial and class tensions of urban space.

Classical detectives, originating in a century of ascendant industrialization, need creative and resolute traits to confront the emerging paradoxes of liberalism in an increasingly capitalist world. They wield their dual nature and powers of detection to reaffirm the rhetorical promises of liberal society. Their detective work examines aberrant criminality and restores unity by identifying and categorizing societal ruptures. Seemingly systemic problems are boiled down to individual solutions. Instead of a divide between liberal social contract and capitalist reality,

classical detectives usually uncover—and defend—a unity that has been threatened by the personal failings of a criminal.

Hardboiled detectives, in their era of fully realized urbanization and industrialization, dig through the facade of order, fairness, and individual responsibility, and bear witness to endless sources of corruption. The hardboiled PIs of Daly, Hammett, and Chandler discover, time and time again, the reality that society is built upon the very ruptures that Poe and Doyle's detectives work to seal. In their world, liberalism's social contract is rendered a sham by the systemic greed and corruption of an increasingly inequitable society. It is ironic, then, that despite this stark contrast of archetypal function, the creative and resolvent traits that allow hardboiled detectives their vantage point are inherited from their classical forebears.

When Sam Spade tells his story about the client who ran away after a near death experience, he says that the man “felt like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works” (Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* 64). This story moves Spade for reasons he both articulates and does not fully understand. Perhaps he sees a kindred spirit in a man who looks beneath the surface and copes with his discoveries as best he can. The hardboiled detectives were men, and occasionally women, who took a look beneath the surface of liberal capitalist society. Where the classical detectives worked to put the lid back on wherever it came loose, hardboiled detectives used their inherited duality to toss the lid aside and investigate.

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